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SUMMARY

¶1. (S) This is the first cable of a two part series on extremism in Tunisia; it addresses the forces behind increasing popular support for violent ideologies. Tunisia's general trend toward increased religious identification and conservatism has been marked over the past year by a relative increase in the numbers of citizens who appear to support violent extremism. Contacts, be they secular or religious, leftists or conservatives, report that more Tunisian youth are attracted to extremist ideologies, including anti-American rhetoric stemming from the war in Iraq. While some are driven by a sense of pan-Arab identity, others are responding to limited socio-economic opportunities, domestic political or security repression, or regional volatility. While mostly manifested as moral support for extremism, in 2007, the GOT convicted hundreds of Tunisians of belonging to and fundraising for terrorist organizations, threatening state security, attempting to undertake "jihad" in Iraq, and other quasi-terrorist activities. End Summary.

MUSLIM VS. EXTREMIST

¶2. (S) In Tunisia, as in much of the Arab and Muslim world, there has been a general trend in the past ten years towards increased religious identification (reflets). More women are wearing headscarves and conservative dress; mosques overflow during Friday prayers; taxi drivers and shopkeepers listen to Quran recitation. While these may be normal sights in many Arab countries, many Tunisians -- including GOT officials -- are shocked that the country that banned polygamy, embraced secularism, and developed a domestic wine industry fifty years ago has seen such a reversal of religious identity. Almost every Tunisian readily identifies him/herself as Muslim, but most are quick to argue that historically Islam in Tunisia has little in common with the rest of the Muslim world. The independence-era generations pride themselves on their secular government, national identity and openness to the West. Even as they experience a sort of religious resurgence, many Tunisians continue to believe that religion has no role in politics and the government is right to keep Islamists out of the public sphere.

¶3. (S) However, in recent years, these over-35 mainstream Tunisians are increasingly dismayed to find that some members of Tunisia's younger generations do not share this identity. A labor leader contact recently expressed shock that Tunisian leftists, communists and Baathists now find their own children are enthralled with al-Qaeda and dream of joining the Iraqi resistance. Even when raised by the most secular families, Tunisian youth appear to be increasingly supportive of extremist ideologies. And the trend is not simply a religious about-face, but seems to impact a wide swath of Tunisian society. One former official of the banned Islamic party an-Nahdha told PolOff that even the children of an-Nahdha activists are turning to extremism. (Note: Although the GOT considers an-Nahdha a terrorist organization, an-Nahdha members (and some in civil society) believe the group could be a moderate force. End Note.) For example, one was recently arrested at an al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) camp in Algeria.

THE PROOF IS IN THE PRISONS

¶4. (S) Beyond these anecdotal accounts, there is clear evidence that Tunisia's youth are increasingly influenced by extremism. While GOT officials (such as Foreign Minister Abdallah) used to merely bemoan a trend toward religious conservatism, many now admit that there is a real terrorist threat in Tunisia, albeit driven by foreign influences. Since the December 2006/January 2007 disruption of a domestic terrorist cell (reftel), hundreds and perhaps thousands of Tunisians, particularly young men, have been detained under the 2003 anti-terrorism law. Local and international NGOs report that prisons are overflowing with terrorist suspects.

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The GOT tried more than 100 individuals in 2007 and convicted the vast majority of crimes such as belonging to a terrorist or illegal organization, gathering money for terrorist activities, attempting to engage in "jihad" in Iraq and other terrorist actions.

WHAT'S FEEDING THE BEAST?

¶5. (S) Theories abound to what is causing this trend, which is likely inflamed by a combination of a push and pull toward extremism (and general religious identification). Like many studies of international terrorism have found, there is no single cause for extremism in Tunisia. Our knowledge of the problem is somewhat limited by the small percentage of extremist sympathizers and our inability, to date, to engage this segment of the population directly. However, lawyers of accused terrorists, family members and other acquaintances have outlined the following commonalities among Tunisian extremists: frustration over regional conflicts (and the USG role in them), feelings of domestic repression and a lack of socio-economic prospects.

¶6. (S) No observer of the Middle East would be surprised to learn that US policies in the region are often cited as the number one cause of extremism in Tunisia. Contacts argue that the extremist trend in Tunisia largely dates back to the start of the Iraq war in 2003 and the desire to join arms with Tunisia's Iraqi brothers. Many Tunisians, including those in the GOT, also blame the spread of pan-Arab media and its inflammatory coverage of the civilian casualties of regional conflicts. Similarly, media coverage of al-Qaeda and other extremist groups has fostered the spread of terrorism as an ideology, while media outlets concurrently spread a message of pan-Arab or pan-Muslim identity. Other regional influences include recent terrorist attacks in Morocco and Algeria and the formation of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. In fact, one contact opined that there are now two distinct extremist trends in Tunisia: one which

identifies with pan-Arab ambitions, and glorifies joining the "resistance" in Iraq, and one which is more focused on the domestic situation and seeking ties to AQIM to execute terrorist activities in Tunisia.

¶7. (S) Civil society activists place much of the blame for rising extremism on the GOT's heavy handed security approach to domestic threats: both violent and peaceful. They argue that Tunisian youth are frustrated with the GOT's restrictions on political discourse and the use of security forces to prevent civil society activities and harass the populace. Indeed, lawyers report that all 30 defendants convicted of involvement in the December 2006/January 2007 terrorist incidents harbored grievances against the Tunisian security forces, whether due to a personal experience or that of a family member or loved one. Further, the inability of secular activists to promote discourse, denounce violence and preach moderate Islam means that young Tunisians are not being positively engaged on political issues. One contact theorized that the trend toward violent extremism in Tunisia is driven by this security approach to the terrorist threat. While in the 1970s or 1980s everyone wanted a political party to compete with the ruling party, today young people believe they must fight the state's security apparatus with force.

¶8. (S) Finally, many contacts are concerned that Tunisia no longer offers the socio-economic prospects for young people that led previous generations to support the Ben Ali regime's social compact (whereby Tunisians have been willing to sacrifice personal freedoms in exchange for stability and a good quality of life). Today's youth face unemployment, inflation, and other economic challenges that prevent many from achieving personal financial independence before their thirties. If the social compact were still feasible, it is likely that most young people would agree to "go along" with the existing system. However, observers believe that limited socio-economic prospects and the related frustrations are encouraging some youth to turn to extremism instead.

COMMENT

¶9. (S) While all of these causes are cited by Tunisians concerned about rising extremism, hundreds of suspected terrorists still represent only a minute fraction of the

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population. Further, extremists' ability to organize seems to be limited, at least for now, by domestic security measures. However, there is no mistaking the broader trend toward the romanticization of extremist ideologies by Tunisian youth. If the past year is indicative of an upward trend of domestic terrorist activity, the GOT is facing a growing threat to regime stability. A single successful terrorist activity, if combined with a disproportionate GOT response, has the potential to incite a wider swath of Tunisian society. Part two of this series will address GOT efforts to combat this trend, what threat it represents, and how the USG should respond. End Comment.

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